



**DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION, PARKS
AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES**

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Mayor William Euille
Vice Mayor Allison Silberberg
Councilman John Taylor Chapman
Councilman Timothy B. Lovain
Councilwoman Redella S. Pepper
Councilman Paul C. Smedberg
Councilman Justin M. Wilson

Re: Patrick Henry Recreation Center

Dear Mayor Euille and City Council Members:

On June 18, the Park and Recreation Commission held a public hearing to address the recommendation for a "neighborhood-centered" recreation center to be incorporated into the renovation of Patrick Henry Middle School. A neighborhood-centered facility would offer more programming to a broader community than a smaller "school-centered" facility. But the neighborhood-centered facility would offer substantially less programming than a larger "community-centered" facility. You will hear more about these options from the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities ("RPCA" or "Staff") at your upcoming meeting.

The Commission cannot at this time endorse RPCA's neighborhood-centered option, but the Commission does agree that a school-centered facility should not be selected here. We strongly urge Council to develop a high-level plan for addressing recreational needs on the West End so that these issues will no longer be relegated to site-by-site decisions such as this one.

The Patrick Henry recommendation illustrates why a high-level plan should be a priority. In its current form, the Patrick Henry Recreation Center consists of a gym (which also serves as the school gym), and a handful of multi-purpose rooms. It does not provide programming to residents during the day, or on the weekend. It is primarily an after-school facility, albeit one managed by RPCA. As the school renovation is being planned – a renovation that will give the school its own gym – the aim of the recreation center is also being revisited. But there appears to be serious disagreement among local residents as to the appropriate "market" for this facility. At our hearing, three residents spoke passionately about the need for a center that could provide a broader slate of programming (technology courses, gymnastics, and so on), and we also heard from three residents who spoke just as passionately in favor of smaller school-centered facility because they have concerns about traffic and open space. We expect there are sizeable constituencies on both sides of this debate.

This disagreement in the community, along with budget constraints, is the reason why RPCA has, like Goldilocks, settled on the middle "neighborhood" option. The prospect that significant recreational needs will go unmet on the West End is why the Commission could not vote to

endorse it. Without an assurance that expanded programming will be offered somewhere in this half of the City, we cannot say for certain that a community-centered facility should be taken off the table.

Our concern is that the City will continue to get the middle option as long as the West End's recreational needs continue to be addressed in piecemeal fashion. The result will be a decentralized network of "neighborhood" facilities and none of the big-ticket items that residents have identified as needs: indoor fields and tracks, swimming pools, community gathering spaces, affordable classes and lessons for all ages. It is economically and environmentally disadvantageous for our residents to be driving to Arlington and Fairfax to find affordable recreational options.

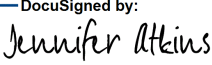
Many of you agree that we need to "think big" when it comes to planning. In the development context, for example, the Council has demonstrated the importance of making tough choices now to set a general direction for site-by-site development in the future. That same insight should be brought to bear on recreation, in particular on the West End. We should think about this region in terms of zones of recreational density, just as our small area plans do for other land uses.


The amount of available land on the West End is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because the City has many large sites where it could provide needed programming in the future, including Patrick Henry, Cameron Run Regional Park, the Eisenhower West area, and Hensley Park (which has already been planned), to name a few. But having these sites available also makes it easy to kick the can down the road on recreation. As long there is some unplanned piece of land out there, there will always be another hypothetical location for the recreational programming everyone agrees that we need, but that many do not want to "host" in their own neighborhood.

We urge the Council to make the choices now to set the direction for development of our big recreation-friendly parcels on the West End. It is not enough to simply say that recreational facilities can be provided "somewhere out there." Without a holistic vision for where and how recreational needs will be met, we will have the same debates about traffic, open space, budgeting, and affordability over and over again. And the inevitable selection of the middle option every time.

The Commission would be happy to assist RPCA in formulating a recreational plan for the West End or to help in any other way we may be able.

Sincerely yours,

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Jennifer Atkins and Judy Coleman, Co-Chairs (2014-15)

Park and Recreation Commission

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